DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 715 EC 305 436

AUTHOR	Kekelis, Linda; Chernus, Nancy
TITLE	Talk to Me: A Language Guide for Parents of Blind Children.
INSTITUTION	Blind Childrens Center, Los Angeles, CA.
PUB DATE	84
NOTE	13p.; Photographs may not reproduce clearly.
AVAILABLE FROM	Blind Children's Center, 4120 Marathon Street, Los Angeles, CA 90029-0159 ($2).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Blindness; *Caregiver Speech; Early Intervention; Infants; *Interpersonal Competence; *Language Acquisition; *Parent Child Relationship; Skill Development; Young Children

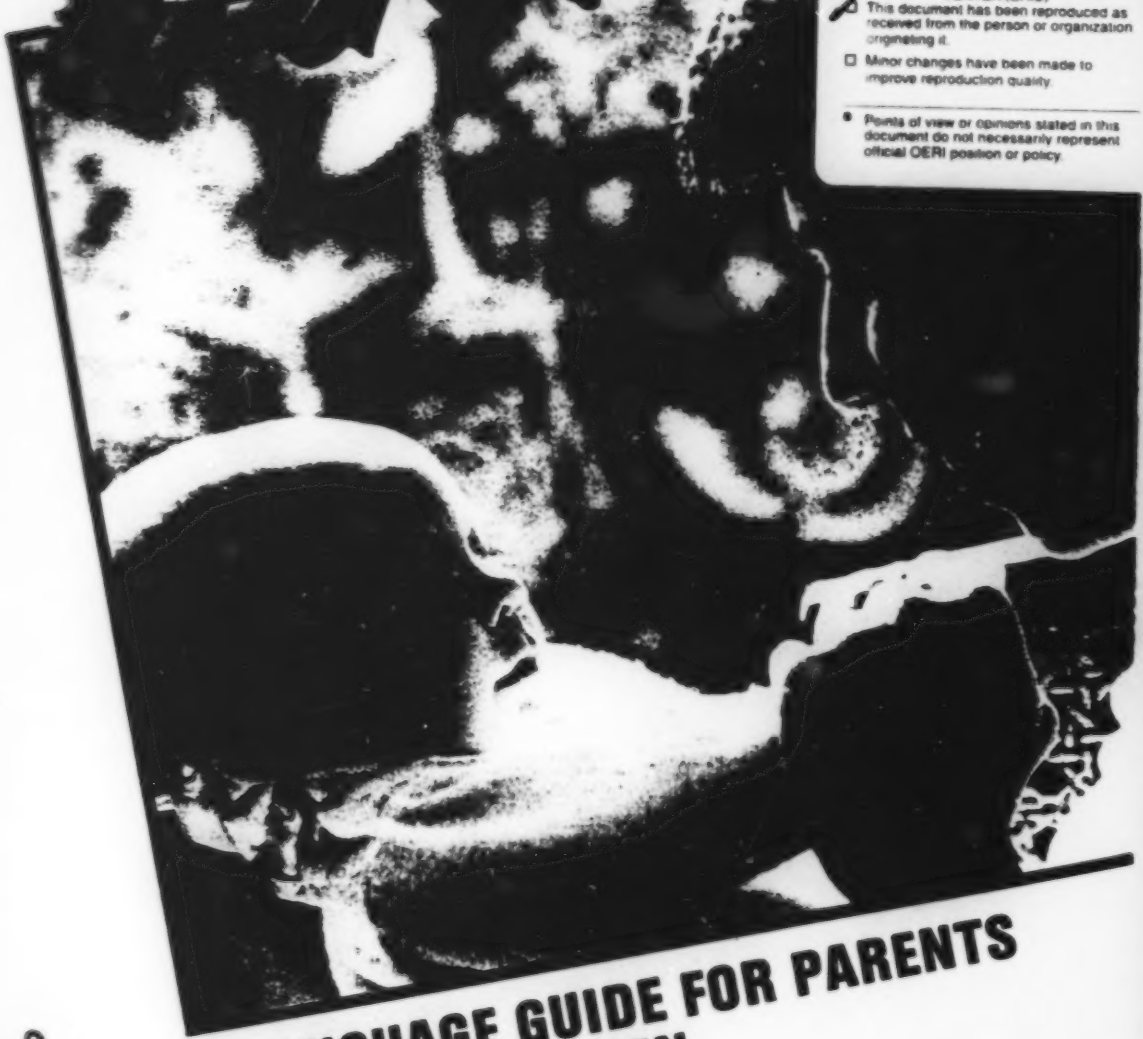
ABSTRACT

This brochure published in 1984 for parents of blind infants and young children offers suggestions for building the child's language and social skills through talking to the child and interacting in a variety of ways. The importance of talking to the young infant, even though he/she doesn't respond with eye contact, and of learning to recognize the infant's efforts at communication is stressed. Other suggestions include avoiding the over-stimulation of constant television or radio, describing family activities to the child, helping the child to explore his environment, including the child in family activities, sharing in the child's experience of the world, helping the child become aware of his/her feelings, and asking the child many questions. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 405 715

Talk To Me



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

A LANGUAGE GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF BLIND CHILDREN

EC305436

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. Roberts
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The ideas expressed in this pamphlet are the result of a cooperative effort, and there are many people we wish to thank.

We are most grateful to the families who participate in the program at the Blind Childrens Center. They have shared their discoveries with us and have helped us to formulate new questions and new ideas. We want to thank the children most of all. They have been our teachers.

Our thanks to Dr. Toni Marcy for all of her suggestions, and to Dr. Elaine S. Andersen, Doug Moore, Mary Hall and Dori Hayashi for their comments.

Our deepest appreciation goes to the Margaret Bundy Scott Trust. The concern and support of everyone involved with the Trust made the reproduction of this booklet possible.

The Blind Childrens Center offers a program of diversified services which meets the special needs of blind and partially sighted children (aged birth through seven years), their parents and siblings. Services include: Infant Stimulation Program; Mom & Me Group; Toddler Program; Therapeutic Preschool Program; Residential Program; Psychiatric Counseling; Multi-Handicapped Program; Educational Correspondence Program; Internship Opportunities.

The Blind Childrens Center is a non-profit organization available to visually handicapped children regardless of race, color, national or ethnic origin, sex or religion. Founded in 1938, the Blind Childrens Center is a project of the Southern California Delta Gamma Alumnae.

FORWARD

As the parent of a blind child, you may wonder how you and your child can find ways of understanding each other. This will be of special importance during your child's first year before he can talk. You may wonder how you will know when your child is listening if he doesn't look at you. Will your child know he's being listened to even though he can't see you are looking at him? What should you talk about when you don't know what's on your child's mind? How will you help him understand the world when he can't see what you are talking about?

At times you may feel you have more questions about your child than answers -- but remember that a blind child has the same basic needs as any other child. The two of you will need to find creative ways to meet these needs. Your child, just as any other, needs someone who is willing to share and respond to his interests. He needs someone who believes in his ability to develop into a competent and creative individual. Your child is like other children, but he does have special needs because of his visual impairment. Please remember that blind children develop differently from sighted children. In this booklet, we hope to provide you with different ways of making your interactions with your child both satisfying and fun.

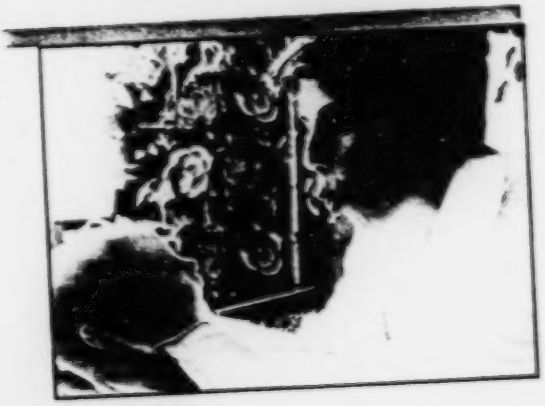
Linda Kekelis, M.A.
Research Associate
University of Southern California
University of California, Berkeley

Nancy Chernus - Mansfield, M.A.
Executive Director
Blind Childrens Center
Los Angeles, California

Baby Talk

We've all used "baby talk" at one time or another with a young child. It is the special way we talk to children - - using simple, short, and correct sentences, raising the pitch of our voice, exaggerating our tone. We don't consciously think about making these changes in our speech when talking to children, and yet we do. This baby talk, though it may seem simple, helps children learn to talk.

Although young infants can't answer, we still talk at great lengths to them. We find that children do respond to our baby talk, and that even before they have words, young children "speak" back to us. How is this possible? With a glance children greet us and tell us they are ready to interact; then by looking at a favorite toy or nearby event they "suggest" what to talk about. They tell us what they want by pointing or reaching for objects and tell us what they don't want by pushing things away. And while we are talking to them, children display their interest, displeasure, and understanding through their facial expressions. It sounds so simple. But what if the child is blind?



LOOK AND LISTEN

A blind child enjoys relationships just as much as any child, but may have different ways of displaying his interest. Keep this in mind and spend time observing him. Watch him when someone new enters the room or begins talking; when the sound of a favorite toy starts or stops. What does he do? Some children stop what they're doing and become very attentive when they hear something of interest. With practice, you will discover how your child expresses his interests. By talking about the things concerning him, you will show that you care, and, more importantly, that *he* has some control over what happens in his life (in this case, over what is talked about).

Young children begin to "talk" long before they know their first words. However, they need us to creatively interpret their "speech". One sighted child we know communicated successfully with grunts. His eye gaze and gestures, along with the events around him, helped his mother understand what he was trying to say.

You'll also learn how to understand your child - - it's a matter of paying careful attention to him and to what is happening.

Infants sometimes talk to us by imitating sounds they hear, such as laughs and coughs, and it is important to acknowledge these early attempts on their part. This will provide them with a reason for learning to talk.

Children can also communicate without using words at all! One young visually impaired girl we know told her mother what routine she wanted to play (she and her mother knew many) by moving her hand on her mother's in a way which identified the routine she had in mind.

"mommy" means many things.

Even after children begin learning words they continue to have more to say than they have words to express. For example, they may use "mommy" to greet you, to request you to get an out-of-reach toy, or to make clear who they want to be with. Expanding their messages seems to help children learn, so if your child says "milk" in a requesting tone of voice, you might respond with: "Here's the milk you asked for. It's cold, isn't it? Or if he says "doggie" while holding the family's pet, you could answer with: "Yes, that's our doggie. Is he licking your nose again? I bet the doggie feels soft after his bath. Oh, he likes it when you pet him."

Each of these remarks tells your child that you are paying attention to what he had said and done. They also add to his understanding of the world - - in this case that dogs like to lick people, feel soft after baths, and are affectionate.

Responding in this manner to blind children doesn't always come easily. We sometimes underestimate what they are trying to say. We often think children can only name objects or request services. For instance, if a blind child says "apple" while holding an apple, we typically say, "Yes, that's an apple." And when there is no apple at hand, we ask, "Do you want me to get you an apple?" There is nothing wrong with these responses if they are not the only ones offered. Unfortunately, for some blind children, these are the only responses they receive and they miss opportunities to talk about a variety of interesting topics. Imagine how frustrating it would be if every time you talked to people they answered with, "Yes, that's an X." Or, "Do you want X?", instead of with a response such as:

> "You said 'apple'. I wonder if you were thinking about the apples we had yesterday at grandma's. She peels and slices the apples and puts cinnamon on them too."

Be creative when you talk to your child. For instance, if your child says, "swing" while you're pushing him on a swing, you might respond with:

> "I'm pushing you so high! You look like you're having fun on the swing. Can you feel the wind while you swing?"

TUNE IN!

Your blind child does have special needs. But he can learn through his other senses. You must provide him with opportunities to make his own discoveries. What you can do is offer a stimulating environment with a variety of appealing toys and household items within easy reach, along with the freedom to play with them as *he* wants. Your child learns while playing in *his* own chosen fashion. However, he needs your help to fill in the gaps in his understanding. While he is playing with an object spend time watching him. You'll allow him to make his own discoveries and you'll make some yourself. One afternoon we observed a mother who instinctively chose to watch her son explore a toy record player first before teaching him how to play a record on it. From watching him, she learned which parts of the record player he explored, which parts were missed.

Just as you learn about your child by sitting back and watching him, your child also learns by "observing". Because he learns by listening to the conversations of others and the sounds in his environment, it's important that he be allowed to listen to the meaningful input around him. Include him in the family's time together. Mealtime is a good time to talk about things that interest every family member. Be sure to include your blind child in the discussion.

Also keep in mind that your child needs some *quiet* time in order to pick out and identify sounds in his environment and begin to make sense of them. For example, by discovering the different sounds of people's footsteps, he learns to anticipate which family member is coming to him; by associating the honk of a school bus with his brother's departure, he begins to organize the events in his life.

If a blind child is kept in a room where the television or radio is constantly playing, it may be more difficult for him to tune in to meaningful household sounds. Rather than providing additional stimulation for a blind child, the constant "noise" of a television or radio may cause him to ignore all sorts of sounds. Instead, he may imitate phrases from commercials, which is of limited value.

SOMETIMES...

There will be times when you won't know how to respond to your child because you can't understand what he's telling you. Sometimes, asking him to repeat himself or clarify his message will work. But when this fails, at least acknowledge him. You might say that you know he's trying to tell you something and you'd like to understand. It is especially important that you acknowledge him when you know he's upset but aren't certain why. The following kind of response would let him know you care: "You're sounding mighty upset. I'm sorry that you're not feeling well this morning. Let's find a way of making you feel better."

TALK, TALK, TALK

You don't have to wait for a special time and place to describe the world to your child. Make everyday routines into learning experiences - include him in your cooking and cleaning chores. As you talk about what you're doing, allow your child to touch, smell, taste, and listen to what is around him. Take something as everyday as a breakfast of scrambled eggs. How is your child going to know that the food served him in a bowl is the same egg bought in a carton at the supermarket? Does he know that the egg was kept in the refrigerator; that it came out of a hard shell and was then scrambled and heated, changing from a slimy substance into the scrambled egg before him?*

We understand that you might be uncomfortable talking so much. But we believe that with practice talking will become more natural.

*We wish to thank the staff of the Variety Club, San Francisco, as well as the families they serve, for sharing this idea and many others with us.

SHARING

While you include your child in your activities, step into his world. You, along with the rest of your family, can spend time sharpening your senses. One family we know, with children who are both sighted and blind, spends evenings in their backyard taking in its sights, sounds, and smells.

Because your child can't see what produces the sounds and smells around him, he might need explanations about them.

Explanations may reduce your child's fear of loud noises or unfamiliar sensations, as was demonstrated for us by a mother we know. While she and her child were talking in their swimming pool, they heard the loud bounce of a diving board followed by a splash. The mother explained that the child's uncle had jumped into the pool, creating the splash and the waves the child felt. She explained the sounds and sensations which could have been startling for the child who hadn't seen what had happened. She also drew the girl's interest to another person.

Keeping your child informed about what other people are doing can make it easier for him to join in a group's activities. Imagine how difficult it would be to become part of a group if you couldn't see what was happening. This can be especially challenging when your child is in an unfamiliar setting with strangers. You can help by describing the situation. For instance, when you bring your child to preschool or to the babysitter, tell him where the other children are in the room, what they are doing, and what toys and activities are available for him to play with.

"THIS LITTLE PIGGIE . . ."

You can help expand your child's interest in, and understanding of other people while you play together. As you teach him routines like "Ring-Around-the-Rosie" and "This Little Piggie", encourage him to take an active part in the games. For instance, as you play "This Little Piggie", ask him to find *your* fingers and toes.

As your child gets older there are other games that help him to play with other children and express himself actively. These games include:

- Rolling a ball back and forth between one or more persons. In this game your child will have a chance to be involved in one activity from two directions, both giving and receiving.
- Playing "dress-up". While dressing up and pretending to be other people, your

child will learn new roles and relationships.

- Playing telephone with a toy phone. It's fun to pretend!

In the beginning, your child will probably need extra help to play these games because he can't learn to imitate some things as easily as sighted children. But playing and having fun are the keys to developing many language skills.

How do you feel?

Blind children need extra help to learn about the feelings of others. From early on, a sighted child closely looks at the faces of other people and learns to "read" feelings from their frowns, smiles and other expressions. This is not the case for a blind child. So it is important that you describe your feelings with words and tone of voice so that your child can "feel" the smiles and expressions he can't see.

Equally important, help your other children learn to express their feelings in words to their blind brother or sister. Remind them that a blind child can't see the smile that accompanies the acceptance of a gift or the frown that follows losing a toy.

TOO MUCH TALK?

To help your child understand other people and objects around him, you will have to talk a lot and at times you may wonder if you're talking too much. Your child will usually let you know by ignoring you, turning away, or responding with "leave me alone". If you have provided him with too much information, don't worry because he will simply ignore what he doesn't need. If he seems to be anxious from too much talking, a little hug or some relaxed encouragement will help. Keep in mind that it is better to talk too much than too little.

Talking a lot to children comes more naturally to some adults than to others. If talking is difficult for you, try sharing activities you both enjoy. One mother and son we know liked bicycling, and she discovered that during and after their trips, they had much to talk about. They were motivated by sharing an experience that was fun. The same idea carries over into your everyday conversations. Be natural and share your thoughts of the moment. For instance, while you are cooking, you might say, "I'm making a special lunch today. After all the work we did this morning, I think we deserve it. How about a fresh fruit salad with strawberries to brighten us up?"

When tucking in your child at bedtime, remember the activities that you both enjoyed that day: "Mmm, I can smell the bread we made. It's baking in the oven. I'm glad you helped me knead the dough. Tomorrow we can have some with grandma's jam for breakfast."

Questions and more questions.

It's not just the quantity of information you provide that helps your child grow, but the quality of it. For most of us, however, talking imaginatively to blind children doesn't just happen. As we have mentioned, this is very hard work. We have found that language can become more meaningful by following up labels with descriptions. Point out how an object feels, what it is used for, or how it relates to some other object that your child is already familiar with. For instance, if you find your child bouncing on

the couch, you might comment in this way: "You're jumping on the couch. It's soft and springy. But couches aren't for jumping on. Let's get the trampoline and you can jump on that."

When a little girl we know became interested in a purse we'd brought to her home, her mother named and described the purse. She pointed out how the purse smelled like leather, like a shoe. She discussed how the purse had a zipper, just like jeans.

It is also helpful to provide a description when you introduce your child to other people. You might tell your child something about what the person does or where he lives.

If you're not providing your child with enough information about his environment, he may let you know with questions. It will take extra effort on your part to answer all of his questions, but keep in mind that much of what a sighted child learns comes by watching people and events. Your child will use questions to make sense of what is happening around him.

Some blind children never seem to run out of questions: they ask questions to draw attention to themselves; to keep in touch with others; to share what's on their minds. They sometimes even ask questions they already know the answers to! Unfortunately, these children may turn off other people with their endless questioning. Why do some blind children seem to ask so many questions and what can you do?

First of all, spend time listening to your child and to the people he talks to. Is he able to get the attention of others when he doesn't ask questions? Some children resort to questions because that is the only way they can get a response. If you find this is true of your child, you might look for other ways to help him attract attention. One way he can do this is by addressing his remarks directly to the person he is talking to. For example, you might suggest that he say, "Sally, talk to me." Also, notice whether your child begins to speak in the *middle* of the conversations of others. If he does, it may be that most of his remarks are ignored but his persistent questions are answered. If this is the case, tell your child, when he is old enough to understand, that it isn't polite to interrupt others when they're talking. And try not to get into the habit of always answering his questions when he interrupts you.

Talk to your child *before* he asks a question. Respond to his actions and comments so that he doesn't have to *ask* for your attention.

Have a look at your speech to see if you are asking your child a lot of questions. All children are asked questions. However, we have observed that some blind children are constantly being questioned. If you find you are always asking your child questions, try other ways of attracting his attention such as calling his name or making physical contact with him. Sometimes share your observations with your child in statement form.

And Finally . . .

We hope some of these ideas have beer helpful.

You are the most important person in the world to your child. Trust yourself because you know your child better than anyone. Because of your special relationship, you are your child's best teacher.

DESIGN: DONNA EBLE
PHOTOGRAPHY: AFSHIN
LEONARD HORN
CAROL STEPPE
BRUCE HOLZ

BLIND CHILDREN CENTER PHONE:
(213) 664-2153

THE BLIND CHILDRENS CENTER
4120 Marathon Street P.O. Box 29159
Los Angeles, California 90029-0159

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 31698
Los Angeles, CA